

GENDER ISSUES IN MANJU KAPOOR'S DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS

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ABSTRACT

The topic I have chosen for my paper is about the patriarchal structures and domination of women in Manju Kapoor's novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998). This novel won the Commonwealth Writer's prize for the Eurasian region. Its original title was *Partition*, it is about the life of Virmati against a backdrop of political happenings before and after partition. The novel is set in the time of pre-partition India and years after the partition. I am mainly focusing on gender issues along with the theme of rebellion, and the role of education, independence and recognition of one's own sexuality.

KEYWORDS: Feminine Identity in India, 'Evolving a Feminist Tradition: The Novels of Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur'

INTRODUCTION

Manju Kapoor's novel *Difficult Daughters* is the story of a daughter trying to piece together her dead mother's past in order to understand why their relationship was always so troubled. The novel begins with Ida's statement "the one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother (P 1) and ends with "Do not haunt me any more" (P 259). The daughter herself doesn't approve of her mother's way of life although aware of her sorrow, pain and agony and now having written about it she has cleansed her memory. Ida, writing of the mother is critiquing her story. The novel is negative for Virmati as she grows up unable to rise above her sexuality. The beginning of the text introduces a negative model, an image of female attention which the text will strive to overcome. In *Difficult Daughters* one finds that it is basically Virmati's story during the 1930's but the landscape of the emotional and sexual life of the three women living at different times in history disrupts the linear time period. In short, the time period shift is within the text- the narrative moves from Virmati to Kasturi to Ida. Virmati, like so many other subcontinental women, is asked to accept a typical arranged marriage. She rebels against that destiny, to the lasting shame of her family, above all of her mother. Insisting on her right to be educated, she manages to leave home to study in Lahore. Nonetheless, she falls in love with an Amritsar teacher known as 'the professor', a married man who first appears in her life as her parents' tenant. After a number of vicissitudes, including a period as a school principal in a small Himalayan state, she finally marries the man she loves and returns to Amritsar to live with him. However, he refuses to leave his first wife, and the consequences for Virmati are harsh indeed: she ends up marginalized by her own family and despised by her husband's. Virmati's tale is told, from a present day perspective, by Ida, her only daughter, who seeks to reconstruct her late mother's life-story, against the background of the Independence movement of the 1940s and the subsequent trauma of partition. Virmati's mother Kasturi, eighth-class pass from an Arya Samaj school, spending the entire day either cooking in the kitchen or performing ritualistic havan or sandhya, could envisage no future for Virmati other than being a wife and a mother like herself. No wonder Virmati's training in this area begins at the early age of ten. She, being the eldest in the family of eleven children is made to play a second mother to her siblings.

Virmati, is brought up to be a wife and a mother, on the consciously inculcated idea of the Indian feminine role. On being engaged to an engineer of her parent's choice, she accepts it passively as a normal event in girl's life. Tired of

the day-long drudgery and child-care, the attention of the professor makes her feel wanted, loved, and this transports her into a world of romance. Discussions of Keats's poetry, Wordsworth's descriptions of Nature and above all the Professor's intensely passionate letters are a new experience for Virmati. It is an escape from the mundane. Love changes her life, imbuing it with newness, freshness and excitement. The married Professor on the other hand is totally self-centered figure. When Virmati is in Lahore, he first implores her through romantic and passionate letters and finally wins over her resolve not to see him. The love making sessions in his friend's house and finally her pregnancy makes Virmati reach a point of no return. Though Virmati is never free from the qualms of conscience, she nevertheless enjoys the biological consummation of her love. Sudhir Kakar in his article "Feminine Identity in India" while elaborating upon Hindu myths and how they play on the female psyche writes that the myths of women like Damyanti, Savitiri but most of all Sita "leave indelible traces in the identity formation of every Hindu woman" (P 44-68). But in this case Virmati does not think on the lines of 'Sita' and is bold enough to show her defiance and anger when the Professor continues to ignore her wishes regarding their marriage. For Virmati love for the Professor who is not her husband, is neither a matter of pride nor does it mean safety and completeness. It is embarrassment. It gives her a feeling of insecurity and rootlessness.

The happiest and most creative period in Virmati's life is that which she spends in Nahan, the capital of Sirmaur, the small Himalayan state run by an enlightened maharaja which gives her refuge for a while as the headmistress of a girl's school. It is there that she achieves the greatest degree of control over her life: there are rules she has to obey, but she is able to teach inside an ordered framework, and her performance wins her a deserved respect. For the first and only time, she has her own place to live and yet she falls. She believes she needs a man, and she makes the wrong choice, returning to a relationship that had already brought her nothing but suffering.

Virmati becomes furious when the Professor put off marrying her, only wishing to prolong her period of study so that he can continue to meet her periodically, without the fear of being seen by his family and friends. Her anger is quite natural as it is she who is putting her honor at stake. It is she who is playing the role of black sheep. The Professor enjoys his marital life and social status but it is Virmati who lands nowhere: she neither has a good social reputation nor is she able to save her job. The repeated clandestine visits of the fatally attractive Professor lose Virmati her employer's confidence and she is compelled to quit her school, house and employment. The female marriage, a social and public statement, is a must for her. It is this which will establish her identity even if it is as the professor's second wife. Marriage thus for her means deliverance from the fear of being socially condemned, a possibility which will perhaps bring her back into the fold and relieve her from the sense of insecurity and uncertainty. The earlier generation of her mother saw no reason to rebel against patriarchal structures. There was complete acceptance in life. Kasturi is an example of the typical feminine attitude to procreate in order to bring about life and pleasure. Like Kasturi, for Ganga, the Professor's wife, marriage is a religious and social institution, where love is not the basis of marriage. Like a meek being, she accepts whatever the Professor does and does not even think of going against the injustice done to her. Krishna Rathore in her article 'Inching towards Freedom' writes:

"A woman was not supposed to voice her experiences and anguish in public. She was indeed free to record them in her private diaries or confide in one or two intimate women friends. There are strong taboos against sharing them with men. It was her sole duty to make her marriage successful even if the husband strayed" (P 54).

Likewise Ganga too makes every effort to make her marriage successful. Her cooking is enjoyed by her educated husband who, anglicized to a point, is otherwise very aloof. There is no recognition of her household skills, the pains she takes in dusting his books, re-arranging his records, maintaining them and everything and everything else that she does to make the house a home. She had thought that she was prepared for marriage but had no idea that she was vulnerable to

attack and hurt from a weak link in her armour- her illiterate state. Having tried and given up learning, Ganga reflects that her husband seemed to be a man who didn't care for her household skills at all. And yet, 'he was impatient and angry when the food was badly cooked, and the house carelessly managed' (P 37). Even when her husband remarries, she accepts it patiently as a part of her fate. Just living with him and bearing his children is enough for her. However, in *Virmati*, there is a struggle between head and heart, the physical and the moral, in which *Virmati* gives way to her heart and body.

Dora Sales Salvador, in her note to her Spanish translation of the novel, appositely stresses:

"Kapur emphasizes the efforts made at that time by numerous women who, while demanding equal opportunities, equal access to education and life-opportunities going beyond convention, were a visible force in the non-violent resistance to the British. The pages of *Difficult Daughters* speak not only of *Virmati*, but of other 'difficult daughters' who succeed better than she did in their parallel struggles for independence in their lives" (P 356).

At the centre of the narrative, we are confronted with a woman who fights but falls by the wayside; but at its edges, as no doubt less representative but still symbolic figures, we encounter other women, whose relative success points the way to the future. *Virmati*'s daughter Ida, who belongs to the post independence generation, is strong and clearheaded. She breaks up her marriage as she is denied maternity by her husband. The forced abortion is also the termination of her marriage. Ida, by severing the marriage bond, frees herself from male domination and power and also from the conventional social structures which bind women. She has the strength that *Virmati* lacks. Thus, her rebellion is again a constructive one. Ida, an educated woman, divorced and childless, apparently leads a freer life than her mother in external terms; yet inside her she feels, even if not quite so acutely, some of the same anxieties as had plagued her mother: 'No matter how I might rationalize otherwise, I feel my existence as a single woman reverberate desolately' (P 3). It is clear from the book's pages that Ida, the narrator through whose voice Kapur speaks, has achieved more than her mother and that this is so even through the simple creative fact of 'writing down' her own family history. To quote Dora Sales again:

"In *Difficult Daughters* we do not listen to *Virmati*'s voice. She could not speak out, being certainly situated at the juncture of two oppressions; colonialism and patriarchy. What we have is her daughter's reconstruction and representation" (P 356).

There is, then, a qualitative leap between the life-histories of (narrated) mother and (narrating) daughter. In addition, as another of Kapur's commentaries, Gur Pyari Jandial, correctly points out, it would be a mistake to devalue *Virmati*'s struggle because she failed, for what mattered was to have made the attempt: "What is necessary is to break the patriarchal mould, and for *Virmati* to have tried to do that in the forties was a great achievement". It is true that *Virmati* does make a daring attempt by choosing education over an arranged marriage. *Virmati* does a professional course but is not career oriented. She does not think in terms of education and profession as a means to achieving individual freedom. Unlike *Virmati*, her cousin *Shakuntala*, from the same background chalks out her own life. She makes the best use of her education and firmly resists the pressure for marriage. In this way, she rebels against patriarchal society. She is clear about what she wants to do and how, and in a way wins her independence.

Another difficult daughter is Ganga in this novel, the professor's first wife who is a sharp contrast to the women who fight for their own selves. Unlike *Virmati* who at least speaks for herself, Ganga is submissive and does not rebel at all against the injustice being done to her. She is too conventional to oppose anything that her husband does. She is totally passive and when her husband remarries, it is as if her life is over but rebellion or opposition is not an option that is open to her. Though, she is perfect in her household skills, she is yet unable to come up to the educated tastes of her husband.

The professor doesn't care about her and she doesn't get any recognition for the pains she takes to rear the family. It is something taken for granted as a woman's duty and which is also seen as her salvation. After her marriage to the Professor, when Virmati asks him what his first wife does around the house, he dismisses it airily with a, 'oh nothing much' (P 199). Virmati's married life with the Professor in Amritsar turns out to be a disaster. She wilts under the implacable and hostile gaze of Ganga, her husband's first wife, with whom she has to live. In the Professor's house, Virmati, the second wife, occupies the dressing room and the formal seating area is used by the guests while the first wife and children occupy the centrally located bedroom. During the summer, the family sleeps on the roof while Professor and Virmati sleep in the garden. This division of space is further highlighted when we are told that Ganga takes care of the needs of her husband like food and clothing and Virmati shares his bed. It is ironical that Ganga accepts everything as a part of her destiny. Her anger and disgust is only for Virmati and not for her husband. He is socially accepted and appreciated for the devotion towards his family and the stigma has to be born by Virmati alone. This thus reflects the double standards existing in our society where there are different laws of appreciation and condemnation for men and women, where women are always seen as the downtrodden class, meek objects who have no identity of their own without men and for all the wrongs done by either men or women, only women are considered culprits.

After the Professor marries Virmati and brings her home, his mother is angry for she knows that Ganga had been a good wife. Her precious son can however not be blamed and somehow the fault lies with Virmati. It seems very ironical that in this case also the wrongs of the man are accepted in a very plain and simple manner and his every action is further justified by his mother. It is only the woman in every case who has to mould, change and ultimately adjust as per the dual standards of society. The so called respectable 'he' has full rights to live life according to his desires and wishes but in the case of women, it is only duties, responsibilities and commitments and the moment she speaks of her rights, she is labeled as a rebel. Marriage is supposed to be mutual bond of trust, faith, love and commitment but even so, in our society, the real liability with the woman. It is she who has to make adjustments and reframe her life according to the likes and dislikes of her husband and in-laws. Kasturi, Ganga and Virmati too go through the phases of adjustment. When the professor remarries Virmati, she is expected to adapt to his tastes and desires. She is used to drinking milk in the mornings but as the Professor prefers tea, she too is expected to have tea. In spite of being highly educated and sensible, she doesn't get her due in the Professor's family. It is again an example of the double standards of the society where a woman's wishes and desires are set aside when she enters into a wedlock. She is expected to be perfect in every sense in her new role of being a 'daughter-in-law' of the house.

Virmati later comes to know that she has lost everything in her mad pursuit of marrying the Professor. She has lost her individuality and her sense of identity. She doesn't get anything from this wedding. In the end, her individual history disappears and becomes all but irrelevant, swallowed up in the greater and more resonant collective tragedy of Partition. It might be more appropriate to go with Jasbir Jain when he says: "This compartmentalized society is a post cold war and post feminist one. It is difficult to come to any definitive conclusion as far as it comments on the feminist positions. Freedom has its own anarchical components, while captivity calls forth rebellion. One learns to work towards short-term solutions in absence of hope" (P 62).

Perhaps that is what Virmati does and in the dilemma of staying single, independent, leading her life on her terms or getting married to the Professor as his second wife, she chooses the latter and finds her own identity completely shattered and lost. Thus, her rebellion cannot be called as a constructive one. She ruins her life, her education and her career for the love of the Professor. Her daughter Ida appears much more sensible than her and her rebellion is again a constructive one where she refuses to stay with the person who is not able to understand her feelings and sentiments.

CONCLUSIONS

In my conclusion, I would like to tell that this is a work that is engaged in transforming a felt agony which is born out of the social perceptions of women and their status, an agony which seeks to break the conventionally accepted roles assigned to women and legitimize the feelings related to wifehood and womanhood within a person to person relationship. So, this novel traces the journey of the women characters, the ways and modes of their protest against gender discrimination and highlight the struggle for assertiveness in society.

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